Welcome to the course!

Course Description:

This pilot year-long simulation is open to all students with an interest in diversity and inclusion (broadly defined) who seek to acquire the skills necessary for success in a professional workplace. The course will include a practicum in skills such as written communication, negotiation, public speaking, organization and time management, professional etiquette, and giving and receiving feedback, taught through a combination of traditional classroom instruction, guest presentations by leading practitioners, and skills-based exercises with feedback and opportunities for improvement.

Recognizing that preparedness for a professional workplace requires an ability to navigate issues of identity, the course will also include an academic component examining the concepts of diversity and inclusion, reasons for fashioning diverse and inclusive institutions, and barriers to inclusion captured in terms such as “unconscious bias,” “stereotype threat,” and “covering.” We will also look at how organizations have adopted super-compliant measures to operate above the strict requirements of employment discrimination law through such efforts as diversity training and choice architecture.

Throughout, the course’s aim is to impart the skills required to flourish as legal professionals, as well as the knowledge and tools to shape more inclusive workplaces.

Meeting Time: Mondays from 2:10 to 4:00pm

Meeting Location: Furman Hall 118 (Fall); Furman Hall 110 (Spring)

Office Hours: Mondays 9:30am – 11:30am: Kenji Yoshino (Vanderbilt Hall, Room 501); David Glasgow (Wilf Hall, Room 118)

Requirements for Course:

- Reaction paper: 20%
- Memo: 20%
- Oral presentation (2 times): 40%
- Class participation: 20%
- Difficult conversation: Ungraded

Substantial writing “A” credit is not available. Substantial writing “B” credit is available, but students who choose to fulfill option B will not be able to count the course credits toward their experiential learning requirement.
**Required Books:**


IRIS BOHNET, *WHAT WORKS: GENDER EQUALITY BY DESIGN* (2016)

SUSAN CAIN, *QUIET* (2013)

ANGELA DUCKWORTH, *GRIT* (2016)

ROGER FISHER & WILLIAM URY, *GETTING TO YES: NEGOTIATING AGREEMENT WITHOUT GIVING IN* (3d ed. 2011)

ANDREA S. KRAMER AND ALTON B. HARRIS, *BREAKING THROUGH BIAS: COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES FOR WOMEN TO SUCCEED AT WORK* (2016)


DOUGLAS STONE, BRUCE PATTON, AND SHEILA HEEN, *DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: HOW TO DISCUSS WHAT MATTERS MOST* (2d ed. 2010)

## Fall Semester 2017

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<td>MAHZARIN BANAI &amp; ANTHONY GREENWALD, BLINDSPOT: HIDDEN BIASES OF GOOD PEOPLE (2013)</td>
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<td>STEVEN PINKER, THE SENSE OF STYLE: THE THINKING PERSON’S GUIDE TO WRITING IN THE 21ST CENTURY (2014) (Chapters 3 and 5)</td>
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<td>CLAUDE STEELE, WHISTLING VIVALDI: HOW STEREOTYPES AFFECT US AND WHAT WE CAN DO (2010)</td>
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*Note: This class will be held in FH910*
### Spring Semester 2018

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<td>Monday, January 22</td>
<td>New Frontiers of Diversity I: White Working Class</td>
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<td>Jonathan Capehart, Working-class whites can’t handle their status as ‘the new minority,’ WASH. POST, Apr. 20, 2018</td>
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<td>Monday, January 29</td>
<td>New Frontiers of Diversity II: Introverts</td>
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<td>Tiziana Casciaro et al., Learn to Love Networking, HARV. BUS. REV., May 2016</td>
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<td>Sue Shellenbarger, How to Cold Call Your Future Mentor, WALL ST. J., Oct. 18, 2016</td>
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<td>Elliott Bell, How to Ask for an Informational Interview (and Get a “Yes”), THE MUSE</td>
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<td>Rebecca Knight, How to Maintain Your Professional Network Over the Years, HARV. BUS. REV., Sept. 20, 2016</td>
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<td>Building Relationships III: Integrating Work and Life</td>
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<td>Anne-Marie Slaughter, Why Women Still Can’t Have It All, THE ATLANTIC, July/August 2012</td>
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<td>Leslie Perlow and Kerry Herman, George Martin at The Boston Consulting Group: Case Studies (A) and (B), HARV. BUS. SCH., 2010</td>
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<td>Stewart D. Friedman, Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life, HARV. BUS. REV., Apr. 2008</td>
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<td>Optional additional reading</td>
<td><strong>ANDREA S. KRAMER AND ALTON B. HARRIS, BREAKING THROUGH BIAS: COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES FOR WOMEN TO SUCCEED AT WORK (2016)</strong> (Chapter 10 – reprise)</td>
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|                    | Practitioner Visit: *Danyale Price*, Diversity and Inclusion Director, Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison LLP  
|                    | *Anne Weisberg*, Women’s Initiative Director, Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison LLP |
| Monday, April 2    | **Organizational Solutions – Choice Architecture** |
|                    | **IRIS BOHNET, WHAT WORKS: GENDER EQUALITY BY DESIGN (2016)** |
| Monday, April 9    | **Written Communication III**                  |
| Monday, April 16   | **Oral Communication Practicum III**           |
| Monday, April 23   | **Oral Communication Practicum IV**            |
| Monday, April 30   | **Reflections and End-of-Year Celebration**    |
Learning Outcomes Specification

By the end of this seminar, you should be able to:

- Grasp key concepts in the field of diversity and inclusion such as authenticity, covering, unconscious bias, and stereotype threat, and apply them to institutional settings
- Understand major diversity and inclusion challenges in the areas of race, gender, and other and emerging cohorts
- Argue for institutional reforms to address barriers to diversity and inclusion
- Write stronger legal papers and memoranda with fewer objective errors
- Organize tasks and manage time more efficiently
- Hold difficult conversations with colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates with sensitivity and tact
- Deliver an effective oral presentation to a variety of professional audiences
- Understand the basics of mentorship, sponsorship, and networking, and deliver a strong “elevator pitch”
- Understand major principles of negotiation
- Navigate common issues and challenges in professional workplaces such as work/life integration, professional etiquette, and cross-generational difference
- Apply individual and institutional strategies for addressing challenges faced by particular demographic groups in professional workplaces
SMARTER
FASTER
BETTER

The Transformative Power
of Real Productivity

CHARLES DUHIGG

Random House New York
Julia Rozovsky was twenty-five years old and uncertain what to do with her life when she decided it was time for a change. She was a Tufts graduate with a bachelor’s degree in math and economics who had previously worked at a consulting firm, which she found unfulfilling. Then she had become a researcher for two professors at Harvard, which was fun but not a long-term career.

Maybe, she thought, she belonged in a big corporation. Or perhaps she ought to become an academic. Or maybe she should join a tech start-up. It was all very confusing to her. So she picked the option that meant she didn’t have to decide: She applied to business schools, and was accepted to start at the Yale School of Management in 2010.

She showed up in New Haven ready to bond with her classmates and, like all new students, was assigned to a study group. This group, she figured, would be an important part of her education.
They would become close friends and learn together, debate important issues, and discover, with each other’s help, who they were meant to be.

Study groups are a rite of passage at most MBA programs, a way for students to practice working in teams. At Yale, “each study group shares the same class schedule and collaborates on each group assignment,” one of the school’s websites explained. “Study groups have been carefully constructed to bring together students with diverse backgrounds, both professionally and culturally.” Each day during lunch or after dinner, Julia and the four other members of her study group would gather to discuss homework and compare spreadsheets, strategize for upcoming exams, and trade lecture notes. Truth be told, her group wasn’t all that diverse. Two of them had been management consultants, like Julia. Another had worked at a start-up. They were all smart and curious and outgoing. Their similarities, she hoped, would make it easy for them to bond. “There are lots of people who say some of their best business school friends come from their study groups,” said Julia. “But it wasn’t like that for me.”

Almost from the start, study group felt like a daily dose of stress. “I never felt completely relaxed,” she told me. “I always felt like I had to prove myself.” Dynamics quickly emerged that put her on edge. Everyone wanted to show they were leaders, and so when teachers issued study group assignments, there were subtle tussles over who was in charge. “People would try to show authority by speaking louder, or talking over each other,” Julia said. When it came to divvying up tasks for projects, one group member would sometimes preemptively assign roles, and then the others would critique those assignments, and then someone else would claim authority over some part of the project, and then everyone else would rush to grab their own piece. “Maybe it was my own insecurities, but I always felt like I had to be careful not to make mistakes around them,” said
Julia. "People were critical of each other, but they would play it off like they were making a joke, and so the group was kind of passive-aggressive."

"I was looking forward to making friends with my group," she said. "It really bummed me out that we didn't gel."

So Julia started looking for other groups to join, other ways to connect with classmates. One person mentioned that some students were putting together a team to participate in "case competitions," in which business school students proposed innovative solutions to real-world business problems. Teams would receive a case study, spend a few weeks writing a business plan, and then submit it to high-profile executives and professors who picked the winner. Companies sponsored these contests and there were cash prizes as well as, sometimes, jobs that came out of the competitions. Julia signed up.

Yale hosted about a dozen different case competition teams. The one Julia joined included a former army officer, a think tank researcher, the director of a health education nonprofit, and a refugee program manager. Unlike her study group, everyone was from different backgrounds. From the start, though, they all clicked. Each time a new case arrived, the team would gather in the library and dive into action, spending hours brainstorming options, assigning research duties, and divvying up writing assignments. Then they would meet again and again and again. "One of the best cases we did was about Yale itself," Julia said. "There had always been a student-run snack store, but the university was taking over food sales, and so the business school sponsored a contest to overhaul the shop.

"We met every night for a week. I thought we should fill the shop with nap pods, and someone else said it should become a game room, and there was also some kind of clothing swap idea. We had lots of crazy ideas." No one ever shot down a suggestion, not even the nap pods. Julia's study group, as part of their class assignments, had also engaged in a fair amount of brainstorming, "but if I had
ever mentioned something like a nap pod, somebody would have rolled their eyes and come up with fifteen reasons why it was a dumb idea. And it was a dumb idea. But my case team loved it. We always loved each other’s dumb ideas. We spent an hour figuring out how nap pods could make money by selling accessories like earplugs.”

Eventually, Julia’s case team settled on the idea of converting the student shop into a micro-gym with a handful of exercise classes and a few workout machines. They spent weeks researching pricing models and contacting equipment manufacturers. They won the competition and the micro-gym exists today. That same year, Julia’s case team spent another month studying ways for a chain of eco-friendly convenience stores to expand into North Carolina. “We must have analyzed two dozen plans,” she said. “A lot of them turned out not to make any sense.” When the team traveled to Portland, Oregon, to present their final suggestion—a slow-growth approach that emphasized the chain’s healthy food options—they placed first in the nation.

Julia’s study group dissolved sometime in her second semester after one person, and then another, and then everyone stopped showing up. The case competition team grew as new students asked if they could join. The core group of five teammates, including Julia, remained involved the entire time they were at Yale. Today, these people are some of her closest friends. They attend one another’s weddings and visit each other when traveling. They call each other for career advice and pass along job leads.

It always struck Julia as odd that those two teams felt so different. Her study group felt stressful because everyone was always jousting for leadership and critiquing each other’s ideas. Her case competition team felt exciting because everyone was so supportive and enthusiastic. Both groups, however, were composed of basically the same kinds of people. They were all bright, and everyone was friendly outside of the team settings. There was no reason why the
dynamic inside Julia’s study group needed to become so competitive, while the culture of the case team was so easygoing.

“I couldn’t figure out why things had turned out so different,” Julia told me. “It didn’t seem like it had to happen that way.”

After graduation, Julia went to work at Google and joined its People Analytics group, which was tasked with studying nearly every aspect of how employees spent their time. What she was supposed to do with her life, it turned out, was use data to figure out why people behave in certain ways.

For six years running, Google had been ranked by *Fortune* as one of America’s top workplaces. The company’s executives believed that was because, even as it had grown to fifty-three thousand employees, Google had devoted enormous resources to studying workers’ happiness and productivity. The People Analytics group, part of Google’s human resources division, helped examine if employees were satisfied with their bosses and coworkers, whether they felt overworked, intellectually challenged, and fairly paid, whether their work-life balance was actually balancing out, as well as hundreds of other variables. The division helped with hiring and firing decisions, and its analysts provided insights into who should be promoted and who, perhaps, had risen too fast. In the years before Julia joined the group, People Analytics had determined that Google needed to interview a job applicant only four times to predict, with 86 percent confidence, if they would be a good hire. The division had successfully pushed to increase paid maternity leave from twelve to eighteen weeks because computer models indicated that would reduce the frequency of new mothers quitting by 50 percent. At the most basic level, the division’s goal was to make life at Google a little bit better and a lot more productive. With enough data, People Analytics believed, almost any behavioral puzzle could be solved.
People Analytics’ biggest undertaking in recent years had been a study—code-named Project Oxygen before it was revealed—that examined why some managers were more effective than others. Ultimately, researchers had identified eight critical management skills.* “Oxygen was a huge success for us,” said Abeer Dubey, a People Analytics manager. “It helped clarify what differentiated good managers from everyone else and how we could help people improve.” The project was so useful, in fact, that at about the same time Julia was hired, Google began another massive effort, this one code-named Project Aristotle.

Dubey and his colleagues had noticed that many Google employees, in company surveys, had consistently mentioned the importance of their teams. “Googlers would say things like ‘I have a great manager, but my team has never clicked’ or ‘My manager isn’t fantastic, but the team is so strong it doesn’t matter,’ ” said Dubey. “And that was kind of eye opening, because Project Oxygen had looked at leadership, but it hadn’t focused on how teams function, or if there’s an optimal mix of different kinds of people or backgrounds.” Dubey and his colleagues wanted to figure out how to build the perfect team. Julia became one of the effort’s researchers.

The project started with a sweeping review of academic literature. Some scientists had found that teams functioned best when they contained a concentration of people with similar levels of extraversion and introversion, while others had found that a balance of personalities was key. There were studies about the importance of teammates having similar tastes and hobbies, and others lauding diversity within groups. Some research suggested that teams needed people who like to collaborate; others said groups were more successful when individuals had healthy rivalries. The literature, in other words, was all over the place.

* Project Oxygen found that a good manager (1) is a good coach; (2) empowers and does not micromanage; (3) expresses interest and concern in subordinates’ success and well-being; (4) is results oriented; (5) listens and shares information; (6) helps with career development; (7) has a clear vision and strategy; (8) has key technical skills.
So Project Aristotle spent more than 150 hours asking Google employees what they thought made a team effective. “We learned that teams are somewhat in the eye of the beholder,” said Dubey. “One group might appear like it’s working really well from the outside, but, inside, everyone is miserable.” Eventually, they established criteria for measuring teams’ effectiveness based on external factors, such as whether a group hit their sales targets, as well as internal variables, such as how productive team members felt. Then the Aristotle group began measuring everything they could. Researchers examined how often teammates socialized outside of work and how members divided up tasks. They drew complicated diagrams to show teams’ overlapping memberships, and then compared those against statistics of which groups had exceeded their department’s goals. They studied how long teams stuck together and if gender balance had an impact on effectiveness.

No matter how they arranged the data, though, it was almost impossible to find patterns—or any evidence that a team’s composition was correlated with its success. “We looked at 180 teams from all over the company,” said Dubey. “We had lots of data, but there was nothing showing that a mix of specific personality types or skills or backgrounds made any difference. The ‘who’ part of the equation didn’t seem to matter.”

Some productive Google teams, for instance, were composed of friends who played sports together outside of work. Others were made up of people who were basically strangers away from the conference room. Some groups preferred strong managers. Others wanted a flatter structure. Most confounding of all, sometimes two teams would have nearly identical compositions, with overlapping memberships, but radically different levels of effectiveness. “At Google, we’re good at finding patterns,” said Dubey. “There weren’t strong patterns here.”

So Project Aristotle turned to a different approach. There was a second body of academic research that focused on what are known
as “group norms.” “Any group, over time, develops collective norms about appropriate behavior,” a team of psychologists had written in the *Sociology of Sport Journal*. Norms are the traditions, behavioral standards, and unwritten rules that govern how we function. When a team comes to an unspoken consensus that avoiding disagreement is more valuable than debate, that’s a norm asserting itself. If a team develops a culture that encourages differences of opinion and spurns groupthink, that’s another norm holding sway. Team members might behave certain ways as individuals—they may chafe against authority or prefer working independently—but often, inside a group, there’s a set of norms that override those preferences and encourage deference to the team.

The Project Aristotle researchers went back to their data and analyzed it again, this time looking for norms. They found that some teams consistently allowed people to interrupt one another. Others enforced taking conversational turns. Some teams celebrated birthdays and began each meeting with a few minutes of informal chitchat. Others got right to business. There were teams that contained extroverts who hewed to the group’s sedate norms whenever they assembled, and others where introverts came out of their shells as soon as meetings began.

And some norms, the data indicated, consistently correlated with high team effectiveness. One engineer, for instance, told the researchers that his team leader “is direct and straightforward, which creates a safe space for you to take risks. . . . She also takes the time to ask how we are, figure out how she can help you and support you.” That was one of the most effective groups inside Google.

Alternately, another engineer told the researchers that his “team leader has poor emotional control. He panics over small issues and keeps trying to grab control. I would hate to be driving with him in the passenger seat, because he would keep trying to grab the steering wheel and crash the car.” That team did not perform well.

Most of all, though, employees talked about how various teams
felt. “And that made a lot of sense to me, maybe because of my experiences at Yale,” Julia said. “I’d been on some teams that left me feeling totally exhausted and others where I got so much energy from the group.”

There is strong evidence that group norms play a critical role in shaping the emotional experience of participating in a team. Research by psychologists from Yale, Harvard, Berkeley, the University of Oregon, and elsewhere indicate that norms determine whether we feel safe or threatened, enervated or excited, and motivated or discouraged by our teammates. Julia’s study group at Yale, for instance, felt draining because the norms—the tussles over leadership, the pressure to constantly demonstrate expertise, the tendency to critique—had put her on guard. In contrast, the norms of her case competition team—enthusiasm for one another’s ideas, withholding criticisms, encouraging people to take a leadership role or hang back as they wanted—allowed everyone to be friendly and unconstrained. Coordination was easy.

Group norms, the researchers on Project Aristotle concluded, were the answer to improving Google’s teams. “The data finally started making sense,” said Dubey. “We had to manage the how of teams, not the who.”

The question, however, was which norms mattered most. Google’s research had identified dozens of norms that seemed important—and, sometimes, the norms of one effective team contradicted the norms of another, equally successful group. Was it better to let everyone speak as much as they wanted, or should strong leaders end meandering debates? Was it more effective for people to openly disagree with one another, or should conflicts be downplayed? Which norms were most crucial?
In 1991, a first-year PhD student named Amy Edmondson began visiting hospital wards, intending to show that good teamwork and good medicine went hand in hand. But the data kept saying she was wrong.

Edmondson was studying organizational behavior at Harvard. A professor had asked her to help with a study of medical mistakes, and so Edmondson, on the prowl for a dissertation topic, started visiting recovery rooms, talking to nurses, and paging through error reports from two Boston hospitals. In one cardiac ward, she discovered that a nurse had accidentally given a patient an IV of lidocaine, an anesthetic, rather than heparin, a blood thinner. In an orthopedic ward, a patient was given amphetamines rather than aspirin. “You would be shocked at how many mistakes occur every day,” Edmondson told me. “Not because of incompetence, but because hospitals are really complicated places and there’s usually a large team—as many as two dozen nurses and techs and doctors—who might be involved in each patient’s care. That’s a lot of opportunities for something to slip through the cracks.”

Some parts of the hospitals Edmondson visited seemed more accident prone than others. The orthopedic ward, for instance, reported an average of one error every three weeks; the cardiac ward, on the other hand, reported a mistake almost every other day. Edmondson also found that the various departments had very different cultures. In the cardiac ward nurses were chatty and informal; they gossiped in the hallways and had pictures of their kids on the walls. In orthopedics, people were more sedate. Nurse managers wore business suits rather than scrubs and asked everyone to keep the public areas free of personal items and clutter. Perhaps, Edmondson thought, she could study the various teams’ cultures and see if they correlated with error rates.

She and a colleague created a survey to measure team cohesion
on various wards. She asked nurses to describe how frequently their team leader set clear goals and whether teammates discussed conflicts openly or avoided tense conversations. She measured the satisfaction, happiness, and self-motivation of different groups and hired a research assistant to observe the wards for two months.

"I figured it would be pretty straightforward," Edmondson told me. "The units with the strongest sense of teamwork would have the lowest error rates." Except, when she tabulated her data, Edmondson found exactly the opposite. The wards with the strongest team cohesion had far more errors. She checked the data again. It didn't make any sense. Why would strong teams make more mistakes?

Confused, Edmondson decided to look at these nurses' responses, question by question, alongside the error rates to see if any explanations emerged. Edmondson had included one survey question that inquired specifically about the personal risks associated with making errors. She asked people to agree or disagree with the statement: "If you make a mistake in this unit, it is held against you." Once she compared the data from that question with error incidence, she realized what was going on. It wasn't that wards with strong teams were making more mistakes. Rather, it was that nurses who belonged to strong teams felt more comfortable reporting their mistakes. The data indicated that one particular norm—whether people were punished for missteps—influenced if they were honest after they screwed up.

Some leaders "have established a climate of openness that facilitates discussion of error, which is likely to be an important influence on detected error rates," Edmondson wrote in *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* in 1996. What particularly surprised her, however, was how complicated things got the closer she looked: it wasn't simply that strong teams encouraged open communication and weak teams discouraged it. In fact, while some strong teams emboldened people to admit their mistakes, other, equally strong teams made it hard for nurses to speak up. What made the difference wasn't team
cohesion—rather, it was the culture each team established. In one ward with a strong team, for instance, nurses were overseen by "a hands-on manager who actively invites questions and concerns." In an interview, the nurse manager explains that a 'certain level of error will occur' so a 'nonpunitive environment' is essential to deal with this error productively," Edmondson wrote. "There is an unspoken rule here to help each other and check each other," a nurse told Edmondson's assistant. "People feel more willing to admit to errors here, because the nurse manager goes to bat for you."

In another ward with a team that, at first glance, seemed equally strong, a nurse said that when she admitted hurting a patient while drawing blood, the nurse manager "made her feel like she was on trial." Another said doctors "bite your head off if you make a mistake." Yet measurements of group cohesion on this ward were still very high. A nurse told the research assistant that the ward "prides itself on being clean, neat and having an appearance of professionalism." The nurse manager for the ward dressed in business suits and when she delivered criticism, she considerately offered her critiques behind closed doors. The staff said they appreciated the manager’s professionalism, were proud of their department, and felt a strong sense of unity. To Edmondson, the team seemed like they genuinely liked and respected one another. But they also admitted that the unit's culture sometimes made it hard to confess making a mistake.

It wasn't the strength of the team that determined how many errors were reported—rather, it was one specific norm.

When Edmondson started working on her dissertation, she visited technology companies and factory floors, and asked people about the unwritten rules that shaped how their teammates behaved. "People would say things like, 'This is one of the best teams I've ever been on, because I don't have to wear a work face here,' or 'We aren't afraid to share crazy ideas,'" Edmondson told me. On those teams, norms of enthusiasm and support had taken hold and everyone felt empowered to voice opinions and take risks. "And
other teams would tell me, ‘My group is really dedicated to each other and so I try not to go outside my department without checking with my supervisor first’ or ‘We’re all in this together, so I don’t like to bring up an idea unless I know it will work.’” Within those teams, a norm of loyalty held sway—and it undermined people’s willingness to make suggestions or take chances.

Both enthusiasm and loyalty are admirable norms. It wasn’t clear to managers that they would have such different impacts on people’s behaviors. And yet they did. In that setting, enthusiastic norms made teams better. Loyalty norms made them less effective. “Managers never intend to create unhealthy norms,” Edmondson said. “Sometimes, though, they make choices that seem logical, like encouraging people to flesh out their ideas before presenting them, that ultimately undermine a team’s ability to work together.”

As her research continued, Edmondson found a handful of good norms that seemed to be consistently associated with higher productivity. On the best teams, for instance, leaders encouraged people to speak up; teammates felt like they could expose their vulnerabilities to one another; people said they could suggest ideas without fear of retribution; the culture discouraged people from making harsh judgments. As Edmondson’s list of good norms grew, she began to notice that everything shared a common attribute: They were all behaviors that created a sense of togetherness while also encouraging people to take a chance.

“We call it ‘psychological safety,’” she said. Psychological safety is a “shared belief, held by members of a team, that the group is a safe place for taking risks.” It is “a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up,” Edmondson wrote in a 1999 paper. “It describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves.”

Julia and her Google colleagues found Edmondson’s papers as they were researching norms. The idea of psychological safety,
they felt, captured everything their data indicated was important to Google’s teams. The norms that Google’s surveys said were most effective—allowing others to fail without repercussions, respecting divergent opinions, feeling free to question others’ choices but also trusting that people aren’t trying to undermine you—were all aspects of feeling psychologically safe at work. “It was clear to us that this idea of psychological safety was pointing to which norms were most important,” said Julia. “But it wasn’t clear how to teach those inside Google. People here are really busy. We needed clear guidelines for creating psychological safety without losing the capacity for dissent and debate that’s critical to how Google functions.” In other words, how do you convince people to feel safe while also encouraging them to be willing to disagree?

“For a long time, that was the million-dollar question,” Edmondson told me. “We knew it was important for teammates to be open with each other. We knew it was important for people to feel like they can speak up if something’s wrong. But those are also the behaviors that can set people at odds. We didn’t know why some groups could clash and still have psychological safety while others would hit a period of conflict and everything would fall apart.”

On the first day of auditions for the television show that became known as Saturday Night Live, the actors showed up, one after another, hour after hour, until it felt like it would never stop. There were two women who played midwestern housewives preparing for the annual meteorological disaster (“Can I borrow your centerpiece for the tornado this year?”) and a singer with an original composition named “I Am Dog” lampooning the women’s liberation anthem “I Am Woman.” A roller-skating impressionist and an obscure musician named Meat Loaf took the stage around lunchtime. The actor Morgan Freeman and the comic Larry David were on the call sheet,
as were four jugglers and five mimes. To the exhausted observers watching the auditions, it felt as if every vaudeville act and stand-up comedian between Boston and Washington, D.C., had shown up.

Which is the way the show’s thirty-year-old creator, Lorne Michaels, wanted it. Over the previous nine months, Michaels had traveled from Bangor to San Diego, watching hundreds of comedy club shows. He talked to writers from television and radio programs and every magazine with a humor page. His goal, he later said, was to see “every single funny person in North America.”

By noon on the second day of auditions, tryouts were running late when a man burst through the doors, leapt onto the stage, and demanded the producers’ attention. He had a trim mustache and wore a three-piece suit. He carried a folded umbrella and an attache. “I’ve been waiting out there for three hours and I’m not going to wait anymore!” he shouted. “I’m going to miss my plane!” He marched across the stage. “That’s it! You’ve had your chance! Good day!” Then he stormed out.

“What the hell was that?” one producer asked.

“Oh, that was just Danny Aykroyd,” said Michaels. They had known each other in Toronto, where Aykroyd was a student in Michaels’s improv class. “He’s probably going to do the show,” Michaels said.

Over the next month, as Michaels chose the rest of the cast, the same thing happened again and again: Instead of picking from among the hundreds of people he auditioned, Michaels hired comedians he already knew or who had been recommended by friends. Michaels knew Aykroyd from Canada, and Aykroyd, in turn, was enthusiastic about a guy named John Belushi he had met in Chicago. Belushi initially said he’d never appear on television because it was a crass medium, but he recommended a castmate from the National Lampoon Show named Gilda Radner (who Michaels, it turned out, had already hired; they knew each other from Godspell). The National Lampoon Show was affiliated with National Lampoon maga-
zine, which was founded by the writer Michael O’Donoghue, who lived with another comedy writer named Anne Beatts.

All of these people created the first season of *Saturday Night Live*. Howard Shore, the show’s music director, had gone to summer camp with Michaels. Neil Levy, the show’s talent coordinator, was Michaels’s cousin. Michaels had met Chevy Chase while standing in a line in Hollywood to see *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Tom Schiller, another writer, knew Michaels because they had gone to Joshua Tree to eat hallucinogenic mushrooms together, and Schiller’s father, a Hollywood writer, had taken Michaels under his wing early in the young man’s career.

The original cast and writers of *Saturday Night Live* hailed largely from Canada, Chicago, and Los Angeles and all moved to New York in 1975. “Manhattan was a show business wasteland then,” said Marilyn Suzanne Miller, a writer whom Michaels hired after they collaborated on a Lily Tomlin special in L.A. “It was like Lorne had deposited us on Mars.”

When most of the staff got to New York, they didn’t know anyone except one another. Many considered themselves anticapitalist or antiwar activists—or, at least, they were fond of the recreational drugs these activists enjoyed—and now they were riding elevators with a bunch of suits at 30 Rockefeller Center, where the show’s studio was being built. “We were all like twenty-one or twenty-two years old. We didn’t have any money, or any clue what we were doing, so we spent all of our time trying to make each other laugh,” Schiller told me. “We’d eat every meal together. We’d go to the same bars each night. We were terrified that if we separated, one of us might get lost and never be heard from again.”

In subsequent years, as *Saturday Night Live* became one of the most popular and longest-running programs in television history, a kind of mythology emerged. “In the early days of SNL,” the journalist Malcolm Gladwell wrote in 2002, “everyone knew everyone and everyone was always in everyone else’s business, and that fact goes
a long way toward explaining the extraordinary chemistry among the show’s cast.” There are books filled with stories of John Belushi breaking into castmates’ apartments to make spaghetti late at night, or setting their guest bedrooms on fire with carelessly handled joints, or writers gluing one another’s furniture to the ceilings, or prank calling one another’s offices, or ordering thirty pizzas to the news division and then dressing up like security guards so they could infiltrate the lower floors, steal the pizza, and leave the journalists with the bill. There are flowcharts detailing who from *SNL* slept with whom. (They tend to get complicated, because Michaels was married to writer Rosie Shuster, who eventually ended up with Dan Aykroyd, who had dated Gilda Radner, who everyone suspected was in love with writer Alan Zweibel, who later wrote a book explaining they were in love, but nothing ever happened and, besides, Radner later married a member of the *SNL* band. “It was the 1970s,” Miller told me. “Sex was what you did.”)

*Saturday Night Live* has been held up as a model of great team dynamics. It is cited in college textbooks as an example of what groups can achieve when the right conditions are in place and a team intensely bonds.

The group that created *Saturday Night Live* came together so successfully, this theory goes, because a communal culture replaced individual needs. There were shared experiences ("We were all the kids who didn’t get to sit at the popular table in high school," Beatts told me); common social networks ("Lorne was a cult leader," said writer Bruce McCall. “As long as you had a Moonie-like devotion to the group, you were fine.”); and group needs trumped individual egos ("I don’t mean this in a bad way, but we were Guyana on the seventeenth floor," said Zweibel. “It was a stalag.”).

But this theory becomes considerably more complicated when you speak to the people on the original *Saturday Night Live* team. It’s true those writers and actors spent enormous amounts of time together and developed a strong sense of unity—but not because of
forced intimacy or shared history or because they particularly liked each other. In fact, the group norms at *Saturday Night Live* created as many tensions as strengths. “There was a tremendous amount of competitiveness and infighting,” said Beatts. “We were so young, and no one knew how to control themselves. We fought all the time.”

One night in the writers’ room, Beatts made a joke that they were lucky Hitler had killed six million Jews because, otherwise, no one would have found an apartment in New York City. “Marilyn Miller didn’t speak to me for two weeks,” she said. “Marilyn was completely uptight about jokes about Hitler. I think she hated me at that point. We would glare at each other for hours.” There were jealousies and rivalries, battles for Michaels’s affection, competition for airtime. “You wanted your sketch to go on, which meant someone else’s would have to get cut,” said Beatts. “If you were succeeding, someone else was failing.”

Even the closest relationships, such as between Alan Zweibel and Gilda Radner, were fraught. “Gilda and I came up with this character, Roseanne Roseannadanna, and on Friday I would go into the office and stay up all night writing the script, like eight or nine pages,” said Zweibel. “Then Gilda would arrive midmorning, totally refreshed, and take a red pen and start crossing shit out, like she was some kind of schoolmarm, and I would get pissed. So I would go back to my office and rework everything, and she would do it again. By the time the show went on, we usually weren’t speaking to each other. I once stopped writing sketches for her for three weeks. I purposely saved my best stuff for other people.”

Furthermore, it’s not entirely true that members of the *SNL* team enjoyed spending time together. Garrett Morris, the show’s only black actor, felt like an outcast and planned to quit as soon as he had enough money. Jane Curtin would escape to her home and husband as soon as the show was done for the week. People would form allegiances, and then get into fights, and then form counter-allegiances. “Everyone was in these cliques that were constantly shifting,” said
Bruce McCall, who came aboard as a writer for the show’s second season. “It was a pretty dismal place.”

In some ways it’s remarkable the Saturday Night Live team gelled at all. Michaels, it turned out, had chosen everyone precisely because of their disparate tastes. Zweibel was a specialist in borscht belt one-liners. Michael O’Donoghue wrote dark, bitter satires about such topics as the assassination of JFK. (When a distraught secretary told O’Donoghue that Elvis had died, he replied, “Smart career move.”) Tom Schiller aspired to direct art films. And everyone could become scathing critics when their sensibilities clashed. “Great, Garrett,” O’Donoghue once said when he read a script the actor had spent weeks writing. Then he dropped it into a trash can. “Real good.”

“Comedy writers carry a lot of anger,” said Schiller. “We were vicious to each other. If you thought something was funny and no one else did, it could be brutal.”

So why, given all the tensions and infighting, did the Saturday Night Live creators become such an effective, productive team? The answer isn’t that they spent so much time together, or that the show’s norms put the needs of the group above individual egos.

Rather, the SNL team clicked because, surprisingly, they all felt safe enough around one another to keep pitching new jokes and ideas. The writers and actors worked amid norms that made everyone feel like they could take risks and be honest with one another, even as they were shooting down ideas, undermining one another, and competing for airtime.

“You know that saying, ‘There’s no I in TEAM’?” Michaels told me. “My goal was the opposite of that. All I wanted were a bunch of I’s. I wanted everyone to hear each other, but no one to disappear into the group.”

That’s how psychological safety emerged.
Imagine you have been invited to join one of two teams.

Team A is composed of eight men and two women, all of whom are exceptionally smart and successful. When you watch a video of them working together, you see articulate professionals who take turns speaking and are polite and courteous. At some point, when a question arises, one person—clearly an expert on the topic—speaks at length while everyone else listens. No one interrupts. When another person veers off topic, a colleague gently reminds him of the agenda and steers the conversation back on track. The team is efficient. The meeting ends exactly when scheduled.

Team B is different. It’s evenly divided among men and women, some of whom are successful executives, while others are middle managers with little in the way of professional achievements. On a video, you see teammates jumping in and out of a discussion haphazardly. Some ramble at length; others are curt. They interrupt one another so much, it’s sometimes hard to follow the conversation. When a team member abruptly changes the topic or loses sight of their point, the rest of the group follows him off the agenda. At the end of the meeting, the meeting doesn’t actually end: Everyone sits around and gossips.

Which group would you rather join?

Before you decide, imagine you are given one additional piece of information. When both teams first formed, each member was asked to complete what’s known as the “Reading the Mind in the
Eyes” test. They were each shown thirty-six photos of people’s eyes and asked to choose which word, among four offered, best described the emotion that person was feeling.*

This test, you are told, measures people’s empathy. The members of Team A picked the right emotion, on average, 49 percent of the time. Team B: 58 percent.

Does that change your mind?

In 2008, a group of psychologists from Carnegie Mellon and MIT wondered if they could figure out which kinds of teams were clearly superior. “As research, management, and many other kinds of tasks are increasingly accomplished by groups—both those working face-to-face and ‘virtually’—it is becoming even more important to understand the determinants of group performance,” the researchers wrote in the journal *Science* in 2010. “Over the last century, psychologists made significant progress in defining and systematically measuring intelligence in individuals. We have used the statistical approach they developed for individual intelligence to systematically measure the intelligence of groups.”

Put differently, the researchers wanted to know if there is a collective intelligence that emerges within a team that is distinct from the smarts of any single member.

To accomplish this, the researchers recruited 699 people, divided them into 152 teams, and gave each group a series of assignments.

*The correct answers for these photos can be found in the notes on page 309.
that required different kinds of cooperation. Most teams began by spending ten minutes brainstorming possible uses for a brick and received a point for each unique idea. Then they were asked to plan a shopping trip as if they were housemates sharing a single car: Each teammate was given a different list of groceries to buy and a map showing prices at various stores. The only way to maximize the team’s score was for each person to sacrifice one item they really wanted in exchange for something that pleased the entire group. Then the teams were told to arrive at a ruling on a disciplinary case in which a college basketball player allegedly bribed his teacher. Some teammates represented the interests of the faculty; others were stand-ins for the athletics department. Points were awarded for reaching a verdict that maximized each group’s concerns.

Each of these tasks required full team participation; each demanded different kinds of collaboration. As the researchers observed groups going about the tasks, they saw various dynamics emerge. Some teams came up with dozens of clever uses for the brick, arrived at a verdict that made everyone happy, and easily divvied up the shopping trip. Others kept describing the same uses for the brick in different words; came to verdicts that left some participants feeling alienated; and managed to buy only ice cream and Froot Loops because no one was willing to compromise. What was interesting was that teams that did well on one assignment also seemed to do well on the others. Conversely, teams that failed at one thing seemed to fail at everything.

Some might have hypothesized that the “good teams” were successful because their members were smarter—that group intelligence might be nothing more than the intelligence of the individuals making up the team. But the researchers had tested participants’ IQs beforehand and found that individual intelligence didn’t correlate with team performance. Putting ten smart people in a room didn’t mean they solved problems more intelligently—in fact, those smart people were often outperformed by groups consisting of peo-
people who had scored lower on intellect tests, but who still seemed smarter as a group.

Others might have argued that the good teams had more decisive leaders. But the research showed that wasn’t right, either.

The researchers eventually concluded that the good teams had succeeded not because of innate qualities of team members, but because of how they treated one another. Put differently, the most successful teams had norms that caused everyone to mesh particularly well.

“We find converging evidence of a general collective intelligence factor that explains a group’s performance on a wide variety of tasks,” the researchers wrote in their *Science* article. “This kind of collective intelligence is a property of the group itself, not just the individuals in it.” It was the norms, not the people, that made teams so smart. The right norms could raise the collective intelligence of mediocre thinkers. The wrong norms could hobble a group made up of people who, on their own, were all exceptionally bright.

But when the researchers reviewed videos of the good teams’ interactions, they noticed that not all norms looked alike. “It was striking how different some of them behaved,” said Anita Woolley, the study’s lead author. “Some teams had a bunch of smart people who figured out how to break up work evenly. Other groups had pretty average members but came up with ways to take advantage of everyone’s relative strengths. Some groups had one strong leader. Others were more fluid, and everyone took a leadership role.”

There were, however, two behaviors that all the good teams shared.

First, all the members of the good teams spoke in roughly the same proportion, a phenomenon the researchers referred to as “equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking.” In some teams, for instance, everyone spoke during each task. In other groups, conversation ebbed from assignment to assignment—but by the end of the day, everyone had spoken roughly the same amount.
“As long as everyone got a chance to talk, the team did well,” said Woolley. “But if only one person or a small group spoke all the time, the collective intelligence declined. The conversations didn’t need to be equal every minute, but in aggregate, they had to balance out.”

Second, the good teams tested as having “high average social sensitivity”—a fancy way of saying that the groups were skilled at intuiting how members felt based on their tone of voice, how people held themselves, and the expressions on their faces.

One of the easiest ways to gauge social sensitivity is to show someone photos of people’s eyes and ask them to describe what that person is thinking or feeling—the empathy test described previously. This is a “test of how well the participant can put themselves into the mind of the other person, and ‘tune in’ to their mental state,” wrote the creator of the “Reading the Mind in the Eyes” test, Simon Baron-Cohen of the University of Cambridge. While men, on average, correctly guess the emotion of the person in the photo only 52 percent of the time, women typically guess right 61 percent.

People on the good teams in Woolley’s experiment scored above average on the “Reading the Mind in the Eyes” test. They seemed to know when someone was feeling upset or left out. They spent time asking one another what they were thinking about. The good teams also contained more women.

Coming back to the question of which team to join, if you are given a choice between the serious-minded, professional Team A, or the free-flowing, more informal Team B, you should opt for Team B. Team A is smart and filled with effective colleagues. As individuals, they will all be successful. But as a team, they still tend to act like individuals. There’s little to suggest that, as a group, they become collectively intelligent, because there’s little evidence that everyone has an equal voice and that members are sensitive to teammates’ emotions and needs.

In contrast, Team B is messier. People speak over one another, they go on tangents, they socialize instead of remaining focused on
the agenda. Everyone speaks as much as they need to, though. They feel equally heard and are attuned to one another’s body language and expressions. They try to anticipate how one another will react. Team B may not contain as many individual stars, but when that group unites, the sum is much greater than any of its parts.

If you ask the original Saturday Night Live team why the show was such a success, they’ll talk about Lorne Michaels. There’s something about his leadership, they’ll say, that made everything come together. He had an ability to make everyone feel heard, to make even the most self-centered actors and writers pay attention to each other. His eye for talent is nearly unrivaled in entertainment over the last forty years.

You’ll also find people who say that Michaels is aloof, socially awkward, proud, and jealous, and that when he decides to fire someone, he’ll cut them completely adrift. You might not want Michaels as a friend. But as the leader of Saturday Night Live, what he’s created is extraordinary: one of the longest-running shows in history, built on the talent of egomaniacal comedians who, twenty times a year for four decades, have put their craziness aside just long enough to make a live television program with only a week’s preparation.

Michaels himself, still the show’s executive producer, says the reason why Saturday Night Live has succeeded is because he works hard to force people to become a team. The secret to making that happen, he says, is giving everyone a voice and finding people willing to be sensitive enough to listen to one another.

“Lorne was deliberate about making sure everyone got a chance to pitch their ideas,” the writer Marilyn Miller told me. “He would say, ‘Do we have pieces for the girls this week?’ ‘Who hasn’t been on in a while?’”

“He has this kind of psychic ability to draw in everyone,” said
Alan Zweibel. “I honestly believe that’s why the show has existed for forty years. At the top of each script, there’s a list of the initials of everyone who worked on that sketch and Lorne has always said he’s happiest the more initials he sees.”

Michaels is almost ostentatious in his demonstrations of social sensitivity—and he expects the cast and writers to mimic him. During the early years of the show, he was the one who appeared with a soothing word when an exhausted writer was crying in his office. He has been known to interrupt a rehearsal or table read and quietly take an actor aside to ask if they need to talk about something going on in their personal life. Once, when the writer Michael O’Donoghue was inordinately proud of an obscene commercial parody, Michaels ordered it read at eighteen different rehearsals—even though everyone knew the network’s censors would never let it on the air.

“I remember walking up to Lorne once and saying, ‘Okay, here’s my idea, it’s a bunch of girls at their first slumber party and they are telling each other how sex works.’ And Lorne said, ‘Write it up,’ just like that, no questions asked. Then he took an index card and put it on the board for the next show.” That sketch—which appeared on *Saturday Night Live* on May 8, 1976—became one of the show’s most famous pieces. “I was on top of the world,” said Miller. “He’s got this social ESP. Sometimes he knows exactly what will make you feel like the most important person on earth.”

Many of the original actors and writers on *Saturday Night Live* weren’t particularly easy to get along with. They freely admit that, even today, they are combative and gossipy and sometimes downright mean. But when they worked together, they were careful with one another’s feelings. Michael O’Donoghue might have dropped Garrett Morris’s script into a trash can, but he made a point, afterward, to tell Morris he was joking, and when Morris suggested an idea about a depressing children’s story, O’Donoghue came up with “The Little Train That Died.” (“I know I can! I know I can! Heart attack! Heart attack! Oh, my God, the pain!”) The *SNL* team avoided
picking fights with one another. ("When I made that Hitler joke, Marilyn wouldn’t speak to me,” Beatts told me. “But that’s the point. She didn’t speak. She didn’t escalate it into a whole big thing.") People might have criticized one another’s ideas, but they were careful about how far they let their critiques go. They disagreed and clashed, but everyone still had a voice at each table read, and despite the sniping and competition, they were oddly protective of one another. “Everyone liked everyone else, or at least worked hard to pretend like they liked everyone,” said Don Novello, a writer on the show in the 1970s and ’80s and the actor who played Father Guido Sarducci. “We genuinely trusted each other, as crazy as that sounds.”

For psychological safety to emerge among a group, teammates don’t have to be friends. They do, however, need to be socially sensitive and ensure everyone feels heard. “The best tactic for establishing psychological safety is demonstration by a team leader,” as Amy Edmondson, who is now a professor at Harvard Business School, told me. “It seems like fairly minor stuff, but when the leader goes out of their way to make someone feel listened to, or starts a meeting by saying ‘I might miss something, so I need all of you to watch for my mistakes,’ or says ‘Jim, you haven’t spoken in a while, what do you think?,’ that makes a huge difference.”

In Edmondson’s hospital studies, the teams with the highest levels of psychological safety were also the ones with leaders most likely to model listening and social sensitivity. They invited people to speak up. They talked about their own emotions. They didn’t interrupt other people. When someone was concerned or upset, they showed the group that it was okay to intervene. They tried to anticipate how people would react and then worked to accommodate those reactions. This is how teams encourage people to disagree while still being honest with one another and occasionally clashing. This is how psychological safety emerges: by giving everyone an equal voice and encouraging social sensitivity among teammates.

Michaels himself says the job of modeling norms is his most im-
important duty. “Everyone who comes through this show is different, and I have to show each of them that I’m treating them different, and show everyone else I’m treating them different, if we want to draw the unique brilliance out of everyone,” Michaels told me.

“SNL only works when we have different writing and performing styles all bumping into and meshing with each other,” he said. “That’s my job: To protect people’s distinct voices, but also to get them to work together. I want to preserve whatever made each person special before they came to the show, but also help everyone be sensitive enough to make the rough edges fit. That’s the only way we can do a new show every week without everyone wanting to kill each other as soon as we’re done.”

IV.

By the summer of 2015, the Google researchers working on Project Aristotle had been collecting surveys, conducting interviews, running regressions, and analyzing statistics for two years. They had scrutinized tens of thousands of pieces of data and had written dozens of software programs to analyze trends. Finally, they were ready to reveal their conclusions to the company’s employees.

They scheduled a meeting at the headquarters in Mountain View. Thousands of employees showed up, and many more watched via video stream. Laszlo Bock, the head of the People Operations department at Google, walked onto the stage and thanked everyone for coming. “The biggest thing you should take away from this work is that how teams work matters, in a lot of ways, more than who is on them,” he said.

He had spoken to me before he went onstage. “There’s a myth we all carry inside our head,” Bock said. “We think we need superstars. But that’s not what our research found. You can take a team of average performers, and if you teach them to interact the right way, they’ll do things no superstar could ever accomplish. And there’s
other myths, like sales teams should be run differently than engineering teams, or the best teams need to achieve consensus around everything, or high-performing teams need a high volume of work to stay engaged, or teams need to be physically located together.

“But now we can say those aren’t right. The data shows there’s a universality to how good teams succeed. It’s important that everyone on a team feels like they have a voice, but whether they actually get to vote on things or make decisions turns out not to matter much. Neither does the volume of work or physical co-location. What matters is having a voice and social sensitivity.”

Onstage, Bock brought up a series of slides. “What matters are five key norms,” he told the audience.

Teams need to believe that their work is important.
Teams need to feel their work is personally meaningful.
Teams need clear goals and defined roles.
Team members need to know they can depend on one another.
But, most important, teams need psychological safety.

To create psychological safety, Bock said, team leaders needed to model the right behaviors. There were Google-designed checklists they could use: Leaders should not interrupt teammates during conversations, because that will establish an interrupting norm. They should demonstrate they are listening by summarizing what people
say after they said it. They should admit what they don’t know. They shouldn’t end a meeting until all team members have spoken at least once. They should encourage people who are upset to express their frustrations, and encourage teammates to respond in nonjudgmental ways. They should call out intergroup conflicts and resolve them through open discussion.

There were dozens of tactics on the checklist. All of them, however, came back to two general principles: Teams succeed when everyone feels like they can speak up and when members show they are sensitive to how one another feels.

“There are lots of small things a leader can do,” Abeer Dubey told me. “In meetings, does the leader cut people off by saying ‘Let me ask a question there,’ or does she wait until someone is done speaking? How does the leader act when someone’s upset? These things are so subtle, but they can have a huge impact. Every team is different, and it’s not uncommon in a company like Google for engineers or salespeople to be taught to fight for what they believe in. But you need the right norms to make arguments productive rather than destructive. Otherwise, a team never becomes stronger.”

For three months, Project Aristotle traveled from division to division explaining their findings and coaching team leaders. Google’s top executives released tools that any team could use to evaluate if members felt psychologically safe and worksheets to help leaders and teammates improve their scores.

“I come from a quantitative background. If I’m going to believe something, you need to give me data to back it up,” said Sagnik Nandy, who as chief of Google Analytics Engineering heads one of the company’s biggest teams. “So seeing this data has been a game changer for me. Engineers love debugging software because we know we can get 10 percent more efficiency by just making a few tweaks. But we never focus on debugging human interactions. We put great people together and hope it will work, and sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn’t, and most of the time we don’t know
why. Aristotle let us debug our people. It’s totally changed how I run meetings. I’m so much more conscious of how I model listening now, or whether I interrupt, or how I encourage everyone to speak.”

The project has had an impact on the Aristotle team, as well. “A couple of months ago, we were in a meeting where I made a mistake,” Julia Rozovsky told me. “Not a huge mistake, but an embarrassing one, and afterward, I sent out a note explaining what had gone wrong, why it had happened, and what we were doing to resolve it. Right afterward, I got an email back from a team member that just said, ‘Ouch.’

“It was like a punch to the gut. I was already upset about making this mistake, and this note totally played on my insecurities. But because of all the work we’ve done, I pinged the person back and said, ‘Nothing like a good Ouch to destroy psychological safety in the morning!’ And he wrote back and said, ‘I’m just testing your resilience.’ That could have been the wrong thing to say to someone else, but he knew it was exactly what I needed to hear. With one thirty-second interaction, we diffused the tension.

“It’s funny to do a project on team effectiveness while working on a team, because we get to test everything we’re learning as we go along. What I’ve realized is that as long as everyone feels like they can talk and we’re really demonstrating that we want to hear each other, you feel like everyone’s got your back.”

Over the last two decades, the American workplace has become much more team focused. The average worker today might belong to a sales team, as well as a group of unit managers, a special team planning future products, and the team overseeing the holiday party. Executives belong to groups that oversee compensation and strategy and hiring and firing and approving HR policies and figuring out how to cut costs. These teams might meet every day in person or correspond via email or telecommute from all over the world. Teams are important. Within companies and conglomerates,
government agencies and schools, teams are now the fundamental unit of self-organization.

And the unwritten rules that make teams succeed or fail, it turns out, are the same from place to place. The way investment bankers coordinate their efforts might seem different from how orthopedic nurses divvy up tasks. And the specific norms, in those different settings, will likely vary. But one thing will remain true if those teams work well: In both places, the groups will feel a sense of psychological safety. They will succeed because teammates feel they can trust each other, and that honest discussion can occur without fear of retribution. Their members will have roughly equal voices. Teammates will show they are sensitive to one another's emotions and needs.

In general, the route to establishing psychological safety begins with the team's leader. So if you are leading a team—be it a group of coworkers or a sports team, a church gathering, or your family dinner table—think about what message your choices send. Are you encouraging equality in speaking, or rewarding the loudest people? Are you modeling listening? Are you demonstrating a sensitivity to what people think and feel, or are you letting decisive leadership be an excuse for not paying as close attention as you should?

There are always good reasons for choosing behaviors that undermine psychological safety. It is often more efficient to cut off debate, to make a quick decision, to listen to whoever knows the most and ask others to hold their tongues. But a team will become an amplification of its internal culture, for better or worse. Study after study shows that while psychological safety might be less efficient in the short run, it's more productive over time.

If motivation comes from giving individuals a greater sense of control, then psychological safety is the caveat we must remember when individuals come together in a group. Establishing control requires more than just seizing self-determination. Being a subversive works, unless you're leading a team.
When people come together in a group, sometimes we need to give control to others. That’s ultimately what team norms are: individuals willingly giving a measure of control to their teammates. But that works only when people feel like they can trust one another. It only succeeds when we feel psychologically safe.

As a team leader, then, it’s important to give people control. Some team leaders at Google make checkmarks next to people’s names each time they speak, and won’t end a meeting until those checks are all roughly equivalent. And as a team member, we share control by demonstrating that we are genuinely listening—by repeating what someone just said, by responding to their comments, by showing we care by reacting when someone seems upset or flustered, rather than acting as if nothing is wrong. When we defer to others’ judgment, when we vocally treat others’ concerns as our own, we give control to the group and psychological safety takes hold.

“The thing I love most is when I see a sketch performed and the actors are really killing it onstage, and the sketch’s writers are high-fiving each other by the monitor, and whoever is waiting in the wings is laughing, and there’s another team already figuring how to make the characters funnier next time,” Lorne Michaels told me.

“When I see the entire team drawing some kind of inspiration from the same thing, I know everything is working,” he said. “At that moment, the whole team is rooting for each other, and each person feels like the star.”